



British Nurses' Association.



What the British Nurses' Association is, and what it seeks to do for Nurses.



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What the British Nurses' Association is, and what it seeks to do for Nurses.

THE British Nurses' Association has been founded, under the Presidency, and with the active support and assistance, of Her Royal Highness the Princess Christian of Schleswig Holstein, in order "to unite all British nurses for their mutual help and protection, and for the advancement in every way of their professional work."

It is believed that, at the present time, not less than fifteen thousand women are engaged as nurses, and the number is constantly increasing. The members of so large an industry have within their reach, and manifestly ought to secure, the benefits which would accrue from the establishment of proper union and co-operation amongst them; and should protect themselves against the introduction into their ranks of unqualified persons, whose want of knowledge, when brought to light by failure in time of need, would necessarily bring undeserved discredit upon the whole body. It is manifest that the amount of reliance which can be placed upon nurses, as a class, will in a great degree determine not only the extent to which their services will be in demand, but also the rate at which they will be remunerated. Every person who claims to be a nurse,

and who engages in the work of nursing, without having been thoroughly prepared for the duties which that work involves, is likely to diminish the confidence of the public in nurses generally, and therefore to diminish not only the demand for them, but also the payment which they will be entitled to receive. Every nurse, who is herself thoroughly qualified, has a direct personal interest in endeavouring to secure the possession of like qualifications by others.

The nurses who have been properly trained in public institutions, and who continue to exercise their knowledge where it has been acquired, are comparatively unacquainted with the conditions under which too much of private nursing is carried on. A certain proportion of those who attempt to become nurses break down as probationers, and either withdraw themselves from further instruction or are dismissed as unsuited for the work. Such women, in many cases, proceed at once to engage themselves as private nurses ; and in this way come into competition with those whose education has been completed. The demand for nurses in private houses is a steadily increasing one ; and it is one which ought no longer to be supplied, even partially, by persons who are unfit or unable properly to discharge the duties which they undertake.

The British Nurses' Association aims, in the first instance, at bringing about a state of things in which no one will be allowed to call herself a nurse, or at least will be regarded as a nurse by the public, unless she has undergone a proper course of hospital training, of sufficient length to give her an insight into the management of all kinds of illness, whether medical or surgical. Next, it will seek to form the now scattered body of nurses into a distinct profession, and to afford to every one of them the additional strength, and the increased importance, which membership of a recognised profession will confer. At present, when we hear that a woman is a nurse, we hardly know what

meaning to attach to the word, but, when the Association has succeeded in the attainment of its primary object, the meaning will be no longer doubtful. It will be that the person to whom the word is applied has passed through a prescribed course of study and practice, and has given satisfactory proof of having turned her opportunities of learning to good account. It will also be that she is not an isolated worker, but that she belongs to an important and well-defined calling, the members of which are united together for all legitimate purposes of mutual protection and help. In pursuance of the last-named object, the Association will seek to originate and to maintain, when necessary by the aid of the public, whatever institutions may seem likely to be beneficial to nurses generally ; such as convalescent homes, homes of rest, offices to facilitate the obtaining of engagements, societies for the promotion of thrift, and so forth ; and will endeavour to guide in the most useful manner, any such institutions which may be established by others.

For the attainment of these several objects, and in order that the Association may be so conducted as to promote the best interests of its members, the founders have felt it necessary that it should be strictly limited to nurses and to medical practitioners, to the exclusion of all other persons. To this rule the Presidency of Her Royal Highness, the Princess Christian furnishes only an apparent exception ; because, as all professions are indebted for their privileges to the bounty of the Crown, the Members of the Royal Family are considered as belonging to them all, and as entitled to share these privileges whenever it pleases them to do so. The medical members will derive no benefit from the Association ; but, on account of their practical knowledge of the requirements of nursing, their co-operation and counsel are likely to be of definite utility, especially at the commencement of the undertaking, and have already been freely and cordially given. All hospital matrons, sisters, and nurses,

are immediately eligible for membership ; as well as all *bonâ fide* private nurses now occupied in the practice of their calling, and all legally qualified medical practitioners.

Although there will be many purposes of the Association for which, as they become better known, help may be expected from patients and from the general public, it must manifestly, in the first instance, be established and maintained by the contributions of its members. A matron, or a medical practitioner, will pay an annual subscription of half-a-guinea, or a single life subscription of five guineas ; while a sister or nurse will pay an annual subscription of half-a-crown, or a life subscription of one guinea. It is obvious that, if each of the fifteen thousand nurses would contribute half-a-crown a year, the Association would possess an assured income of over eighteen hundred pounds. It is gratifying to be able to say, thus early in its history, that more than six hundred members have actually been enrolled.

The government of the Association is vested in a Council, elected by the members at their Annual Meeting ; and this Council, being too numerous to assemble frequently, appoints an Executive Committee for the conduct of its ordinary business. Both the Council and the Executive Committee are so constituted as to contain representatives of every class comprised in the Association ; that is to say, of matrons, sisters, nurses, and medical practitioners. As soon as a sufficient number of members have been obtained, it will be the business of the Council to petition the Crown for the grant of a Royal Charter, by which the proceedings of the Association would be invested with a greater measure of authority than can attach to them so long as it retains its present character of a private Society.

It has already been said that, for the present, every woman actually engaged in nursing is eligible for membership ; and it is intended that this liberality shall be continued until the end

of the present year. After that time, new regulations concerning the qualifications for membership will come into force ; and an endeavour will be made, in some way or other, to render the membership equivalent to an authoritative registration, by which the skill and competence of a nurse will be certified to the public. The precise method by which this will be done has yet to be determined by the Council ; and the subject is one on which some differences of opinion are known to exist. It is therefore only possible to say, at present, that, as the Council is a strictly representative body, it is one in which the views of the majority of the members of the Association, on this question and on all others, must ultimately prevail.

The Executive Committee has heard, with much regret, that the nurses of a few public institutions have been advised, by persons holding positions of some influence or authority in relation to them, to stand aloof from the Association ; and the Committee would strongly urge upon all nurses, to whom such advice may be given, to weigh it very carefully before consenting to act upon it. Among male workers, whether in the most highly skilled professions or in the humblest trades, the experience of many years has fully proved that combination is a source of great advantages ; and of these advantages there can be no good reason why women should be deprived. It is unfortunately true that the interests of employers and of the employed cannot always, and at all points, be the same ; and even the most benevolent and considerate of employers are not entirely free from a tendency to think that their own opinions or convenience should of necessity prevail in every case of difference. It is seldom easy to look at any question from the point of view of others whom it may concern ; and hence it need occasion no surprise if a few among the employers of nurses are found to attach comparatively small importance to the legitimate wishes of the nurses themselves, or even to entertain some fear

lest a powerful Association should diminish competition, should insist upon privileges or rates of payment which can easily be refused to the isolated demands of individuals, or should generally tend to place nurses in a position which might compel the modification of some existing arrangements. There is even a rumour that the authorities of some institutions intend to set up little registration schemes of their own, in antagonism to a general one, and thus to provoke rivalry between the nurses who have been taught and "registered" at this place or at that. It is to be hoped that the good sense of nurses themselves will enable them to see the inevitable tendency of proceedings of this kind, and will prevent them from suffering the strength which they might derive from union to be split up and frittered away. The question is now entirely in their own hands. The present opportunity of entering into combination, if lost or neglected, is not likely, for a long while, to recur under conditions equally favourable ; and nurses may be quite sure that, if they determine to avail themselves of it, they will be cordially supported by public opinion. Their example, in that case, will certainly be followed in other departments of female industry ; and they will have the merit, not only of helping themselves, but also of assisting to place other working women in a better position than that which they now occupy.

Any further information, or Forms of Application for Membership, can be obtained by writing to the Hon. Secretaries, British Nurses' Association, 20, Upper Wimpole Street, London, W.

